

Dwelling upon Metaphors: The Translation of William Gass's Novellas

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1. Introduction

In this paper I will present a contextual approach to metaphor translation in literary discourse, with specific reference to a collection of novellas by contemporary American writer William H. Gass (1927-). Metaphor translation has been considered as exemplifying the limits of translatability (Van den Broeck, 1981) and has since intrigued a number of scholars in Translation Studies, who have tackled the issue from several points of view (prescriptive, contextual, descriptive and cognitive) and in relation to different types of discourse.

In this paper literary metaphors and their translatability will be analyzed within the frame of a specific and enclosed work of fiction. A contextual approach to metaphor translation is necessary in order to account for the broader scope that single linguistic metaphors may undertake within the network of relations of a literary text. Such an approach allows identification of cross-references between distant metaphorical expressions, as well as extended metaphorical patterns; as a consequence, translation choices can be tailored on the basis of a more comprehensive textual metaphors.

Moreover, literary discourse represents a less explored field in the study of metaphor translation, which so far has focused mostly on journalistic or political discourse, with the result of dealing primarily with conventional metaphors. The choice of a literary corpus, namely a collection of novellas built around a central theme, responds to the need to show how metaphors in literary texts can enrich the text's aesthetic value, its internal coherence and its cognitive strength. If we consider the text to be a self-enclosed unit, the translation of metaphors becomes a challenge in which the translator's goal is the recreation of an equally coherent and evocative system of images and connections in the target language. *Cartesian Sonata & Other Novellas* by William Gass proves a

fertile ground for such an exploration, due to both its rich imagery and its stylistic and structural cohesion.

I shall start by introducing the scholarly debate over metaphor translation in the last thirty years, before moving on to an overview of Gass's aesthetics and a more in-depth exploration of this collection of novellas. These novellas have not been translated yet into any other language, therefore this paper will be primarily focused on my own experience as a reader and translator, occasionally resorting to my unpublished Italian translation to show how linguistic and cultural constraints may in this case affect the task of the translator.

2. Metaphor as a Translation Problem

The first important contributions to metaphor in translation appeared in the late 70s/early 80s, thanks to the work of scholars like Menachem Dagut (1976) and Peter Newmark (1980). Early contributions shared a prescriptive approach and the tendency to consider metaphorical utterances mostly as isolated expressions, omitting to consider the relevance of contextual constraints.

The first steps toward a descriptive approach to metaphor translation were taken by Raymond Van den Broeck (1981), who, against Newmark's rigid categories, suggested a more dynamic classification of metaphors along a spectrum, which accommodated diachronic and synchronic shifts between the opposite poles of original metaphors and lexicalized ones (catachreses). He drew attention to the role of context and formulated a law for metaphor translatability, applying Itamar Even Zohar's general law of translatability to the specific case of metaphors: "Translatability keeps an inverse proportion with the quantity of information manifested by the metaphor and the degree to which this information is structured in a text" (Van den Broeck 1981: 84). His contribution was pivotal in providing a model for metaphor translatability, capable of accounting for contextual interaction and functional relevance of metaphors in discourse.

His model was adopted and extended by Mary Snell-Hornby, who stressed the textual nature of metaphors within an integrated approach,¹

¹ In that it does not consider language "as an isolated phenomenon suspended in a vacuum but as an integral part of culture" (Snell-Hornby 1995: 41).

concluding: “Whether a metaphor is “translatable” (i.e. whether a literal translation could recreate identical dimensions), how difficult it is to translate, how it can be translated and whether it should be translated at all cannot be decided by a set of abstract rules, but must depend on the structure and function of the metaphor within the text concerned” (Snell-Hornby 1988-1995: 58). A further development can be found in Gideon Toury’s formulation of a more articulated descriptive model for metaphor translation: he suggested a two-way analysis of source and target texts in order to include target-text metaphors which did not have an equivalent in the source-text (i.e. cases of non-metaphors translated with metaphors), which allows accounting for strategies of compensation employed by translators (see Toury 1995:259-79).

More recently, the “cognitive turn” experienced by metaphorology after the publication of George Lakoff and Mark Johnson’s *Metaphors We Live By* (1980) has generated a series of interesting contributions on metaphors in literary discourse, such as George Lakoff and Mark Turner’s application of conceptual metaphor theory to poetic metaphors (Lakoff and Turner 1989), and Gerard Steen’s extensive account of the process of metaphor understanding in literature (Steen 1994). A cognitive perspective came to be applied to metaphor translation by scholars like Ernst-Norbert Kurth (1994),² Nili Mandelblit (1995), Zoltán Kövecses (2003) and Christina Schäffner (2004).³ The cognitive approach to metaphor has led to a progressive dismissal of the traditional criteria of abnormality or deviance (Steen 1994: 4), as well as a progressive shift of focus from purely linguistic grounds onto conceptual grounds, since linguistic metaphors are seen as realizations of underlying conceptual metaphors. As an effect, the traditional distinction between metaphor and similes has also been dismissed, since both metaphors and similes can involve conceptual metaphors and be the result of similar mappings (Lakoff and Turner 1989: 133).

² Actually his position is mostly inspired by M. Vannerem and M. Snell-Hornby’s scenes-and-frames model, which he applied to the contrastive analysis of several German translations of three metaphors from Dickens’s *Pickwick Circle*, with some useful insights on the role of “foregrounding.”

³ Schäffner’s contribution reflected on the implications of a cognitive approach to political discourse in translation, while Mandelblit (1995) and Kövecses (2003) offered cross-cultural analyses of the “productivity” of certain conceptual metaphors in different languages.

3. Metaphor Must Be Its God: William Gass's Language

Essayist, novelist, short-story writer and former philosophy professor, William Gass has been defined through his long career mainly as a formalist, and indeed a deep formalist interest in the power of language animates all of his works, both as a subject matter (as in many of his essays) and form (in both his fiction and non-fiction). His imagery is extremely vivid and vigorous and metaphor has always been a constructive principle (fictions are, after all, "monumental metaphors of the world"), as well as a stylistic trademark of his writing. Gass's language strives after the democratic mix he advocates in one of his fictional work: "Then let us have a language worthy of our world, a democratic style where rich and well-born nouns can roister with some sluttish verb yet find themselves content and uncomplained of. [...] Metaphor must be its god now gods are metaphors" (*Willie Master's Lonesome Wife*, unpagged). Indeed his prose draws much of its strength from the clash between rhetorical majesty on the one hand and a fervent oral quality on the other, with an underlying relish for verbal playfulness and the physicality of words.

Metaphor has always been one of the central concepts of his aesthetics.⁴ Gass's view of metaphor proceeds from his mentor Max Black's "interaction view," according to which novel meaning is generated in the interaction between the focus (the non-literal term) and the frame (the literal setting for the focus).⁵ The interaction between these two systems (or implication-complexes) provides metaphors with their "distinctive power" and can have, Black argues, a strong cognitive function, in that they can "generate new knowledge and insight by changing relationships between the things designated" (Black 1979: 35).

⁴ As exposed in some of his essays, most notably "In Terms of the Toenail: Fiction and Figures of Life" (Gass 1970: 55-76), but also "Groping for Trouts" and "Carrots, Noses, Snow, Rose, Roses" (Gass 1978: 262-307), as well as in his doctoral dissertation titled "A Philosophical Investigation of Metaphor" (Cornell University, 1954).

⁵ A somehow more influential terminology (introduced by I. A. Richards) has the two terms identified as "tenor" (the subject to which attributes are ascribed) and "vehicle," while conceptual metaphor theory prefers "target" and "source" domains.

Gass seems to endorse a truly and fully interactive view, in which “the figure is drawn both ways,” that is to say both terms of the metaphor (and not only the “tenor,” as the traditional view wants it) change in the interactive process.⁶ His personal interest seems directed toward metaphors with a high degree of figurative impact, metaphors “which are deeply committed, which really mean what they say, are systematic—the whole net of relationship matters” (Gass 1970: 67).⁷ In this sense, as Klinkowitz points out: “When written well, metaphor becomes a process of sensuous exhibition, an organization which draws attention to itself as well as to its object of discourse” (Klinkowitz 1984: 63-64).

Metaphor is also a way to revitalize a medium worn out by its functionality, restoring the pristine force of the word. In this respect, metaphor assumes an almost genealogic function, which implies a great care on the part of the author for linguistic and stylistic choices. This is quite evident in Gass’s analysis of the effects of the transformation that language undergoes in literature: “Adventitious, accidental, and arbitrary properties of words, such as their sound, spelling, visual configuration, length, dentition, social status, etc., become essential” (Gass 1978: 297). The idea of a process exhibiting itself is central to Gass’s use of metaphors, as well as to his overall metafictional research. The reader shall be conscious of reading words and willing to linger on their physicality, instead of skipping directly to their referents, since novels, as Gass reminds us, are first and foremost made of words. (Gass 1970: 27)

4. Mind, Matter and God: Tropes of the Text

Cartesian Sonata & Other Novellas (1998) is William Gass’s latest work of fiction to date.⁸ The collection is composed of four novellas, conceived around the Cartesian themes of mind, matter and God. The opening novella is divided into three sections, each offering a different perspective

⁶ “We are inclined to think that in metaphors only one term is figurative [...] but this inclination should be resisted; it is frequently mistaken” (Gass 1970: 67).

⁷ See Max Black’s “emphatic” metaphors, metaphors “intended to be dwelt upon for their unstated implications” (Black 1979: 26).

⁸ Two novellas and a few chapters from a novel-in-progress have appeared in literary magazines in the last few years, but none of these pieces have been collected by the author so far.

on the story of Ella Bend's clairvoyance, and setting the tone for the whole collection.⁹ The other three novellas each explore the above-mentioned Cartesian notions. The sonata-form hinted at in the title serves as a metaphorical structural principle, with its canonical three-movement structure echoed in the three sections of the first novella, as well as in the three remaining novellas, each sparkling from one of those sections. This form provides the collection with an internal scheme based on repetition and variations on a series of themes, according to a compositional principle not unusual in Gass's fiction, and conceived as alternative to a strictly plot-driven narrative. Such a structure follows his concept of writing as exposure of a symbolic centre, through recursive patterns and progressive unlayering of themes. Nonetheless, music in *Cartesian Sonata & Other Novellas* is also a defining stylistic trademark, as it will be made apparent further on, by analyzing the lyrical quality of some passages and the author's extensive use of alliteration.

The ontological question and the moral question at the core of Cartesian philosophy represent the leitmotifs of the collection, the tropes of the text.¹⁰ The three Cartesian notions are all tackled in the three sections of the opening novella, "Cartesian Sonata," in which Ella Bend's clairvoyance is presented first through the perspective of a God-like narrator, then from the clairvoyant's own spiritual point of view, and finally through the eyes of her down-to-earth husband Edgar Hess. The second novella, "Bed and Breakfast," is the exploration of a travelling accountant's love of matter, which borders on pure devotion for an odd assortment of man-made objects. A deep tension toward the mind pervades "Emma Enters a Sentence of Elizabeth Bishop's," the story of Emma Bishop's escape from her shallow life in the beauty of language and poetry. In her gradual loss of weight and her longing for lying down and dying in a line of Elizabeth Bishop's, one can see her progressive detachment from matter toward the non-corporeity of mind. The contrasting personalities of the spirit-oriented Emma and her "mechanistic" father echo the same dualism between mind and matter existing within the Hess family. The last novella, "The Master of Secret Revenges" is the longest and most narrative and raises the moral

⁹ The three parts composing the first novella appeared separately in literary magazines in the mid-sixties and mid-seventies, while the other novellas have been conceived specially for this collection.

¹⁰ See "The Tropes of the Text" in Gass (1986: 141-159).

question, that is the relation between soul and divinity. Introduced in the first section of “Cartesian Sonata,” this issue finds a somewhat ironic account in Luther Penner’s peculiar reformatory theology of secret revenges, in which Descartes’ benevolent God is ultimately overcome by a merciless Lucifer.

5. Metaphors in Translation: Contextual Constraints

In my analysis I shall concentrate on the central dualism between mind and matter, which is extensively explored and reinforced through metaphorical language. Similes and metaphors seem to redefine objects, actions, thoughts, creating analogies, establishing connections and often fusing things together. It is so that the quintessential Cartesian struggle ultimately revives (and finally dissolves) in language, showing how “the writer’s wrestle with the word is not any different than Descartes’ with the world” (Gass 1985: 155). The writer’s task consists in finding and enabling the right connections between concepts and language, a process exhausted in everyday use of language and therefore calling for revitalization.

Several linguistic metaphors and similes can be traced back to this dualism, which is resolved in language through the intervention of a God-like narrator connecting abstract concepts and concrete referents through his mastery over language. In the light of this dualism, metaphor seems to take up the double task of exposing the contrast on the one hand, and conciliating it on the other, thus establishing some “divine” connection between mind and matter. Mind and matter may so become terms of a continuum in which edges are blurred, cross-fading into each other.

We shall start by isolating a few significant instances of metaphorical expressions witnessing a peculiar approach to matter, and then move on to consider a conceptual metaphor linked to this theme and extensively explored in these novellas.

5.1 *Matter and Mind and Metaphor*

Matter is the underlying trope of the final section of “Cartesian Sonata” and of the second novella, “Bed & Breakfast”. While in the former the trope functions primarily as a model for Edgar Hess’s materialism (defined mostly in opposition to his wife’s spiritual nature), in the second novella it is explored in the odd matter of Betty’s Bed and Breakfast. The place is a small, self-enclosed world, inhabited by a bizarre gallery of little objects which exert a profound and peculiar effect on Walter’s mind. Their ordered beauty inspires him with devote fascination and almost overcomes him. The world around him is essentially a world of objects, to which he tries to relate, often “adamitically” struggling to name things around him,¹¹ looking for his own place in that safe space. In the process, a progressive assimilation occurs, a sort of metamorphosis in which person and object are blurred into one another, as when Walter’s face is presented as “covered with little crinkles like the lacquered surface of the secretary?” (Gass 1998: 83) [*il viso*] *coperto di piccole grinze come la superficie laccata dello scrittoio*].

Here are two passages witnessing the incessant two-way movement between people and objects:

At last, Walter slid naked between the cool sheets, as careful as if he were a layer himself, and felt their cool calming touch, the touch of an other who wanted nothing from him but would grow warm when he relaxed and went to sleep in his skin. (Gass 1998: 116)

Alla fine, Walter scivolò nudo tra le lenzuola fresche, cauto come se anche lui fosse uno strato, e sentì il loro tocco fresco e rassicurante, il tocco di un qualcuno che non voleva niente da lui, ma che sarebbe diventato caldo se si rilassava e si metteva a dormire a pelle nuda.

This passage is symbolic of the symbiosis between person and objects, sliding into one another and losing their respective features in the process. Walter feels like a layer himself, while the caress of the sheets

¹¹ The idea of naming things as a self-defining act comes from medieval symbolism and is recurrent in Gass’s fiction. See for instance Henry Pimber in William Gass’s first novel, *Omensetter’s Luck* (New York: New American Library, 1966).

has a distinctive human quality.¹² The feminine noun *lenzuola* for sheets¹³ allowed a gentle hint to the femininity of the gesture. On the contrary, for “an other,” the choice was made to remain as neuter as possible, by using *un qualcuno* [lit. “a someone”] in order to avoid having to make the gender too explicit.¹⁴ Grammatical gender proves both a resourceful tool and a constraint in the hands of the Italian translator, offering up new possibilities for connotations, as well as requiring that a choice be made and a quality made explicit, with all its social and ideological burden.

The next passage is a portrait of Missus Ambrose, Walter’s host at Betty’s Bed and Breakfast, as seen by Walter himself.

She hadn’t her apron on now, her bust and hips sloped like land seen from a high hill—smoothly and without a wrinkle. Her face remained pale and long. She had itty-bitty eyes, Riff suddenly noticed. Itty-bitty. Like lookouts. The skin of her cheeks seemed drawn, and shone in better light like tile. (Gass 1998: 95)

Ora non portava il grembiule; busto e fianchi digradavano come un campo visto da un’alta collina—morbidi e senza pieghe. Il viso restava pallido e lungo. Aveva occhi piccini, notò tutt’a un tratto Riff. Piccini piccini. Come vedette. La pelle delle guance appariva tirata e risplendeva, in miglior luce, come una piastrella.

This sensuous portrait of Missus Ambrose has her body depicted in terms of the distant and smooth outline of a portion of land. My lexical choices try to maintain the sensuality of this description: the verb “slope” has been translated as *digradare* (lit. “to slope down”), a verb which well depicts the movement, although it barely has any conventional figurative meaning in Italian. This has resulted in a slightly higher degree of metaphoricity, an effect softened by the combination of metaphor and simile in the expression. After taking her out to distant lands, the closing simile brings Missus Ambrose abruptly back to her own domestic dimension, reaffirming with a quick change of tone and rhythm her belonging to the house, to which she contributes its beauty and order. The

¹² The simile is repeated several pages later: “Walter slid between the sheets, sheets cool as a caress [...]” (Gass 1998: 135)

¹³ Interestingly, Italian allows both masculine and feminine plural of the noun, *lenzuoli/lenzuola*, the latter being more common for bed-sheets.

¹⁴ Although the noun is masculine (Italian only allows masculine and feminine as grammatical genders), in this case the grammatical gender is less relevant and marked than its semantic gender, which is essentially neuter.

whole passage is also characterized by a distinctive musical quality: it starts off with a series of round vowels introducing the first simile, and reinforcing a portrait of fullness and roundness, only to change sharply around her eyes (itty-bitty), and from there on the rhythm is accelerated, the vowels shortened, climaxing in the final “inverted” simile “light/tile”. My own rendering proves defective in this respect: although “piccini piccini” serves well as “itty-bitty,” the final simile did not retain the same illocutionary force of the source text.

Walter’s fascination with man-made objects induces transformation in the surrounding natural world, perceived as another object in his mind. So we encounter similes like: “a milky morning light glowed in the glassware like a low-watt bulb” [una lattiginosa luce mattutina brillava sulla cristalleria come una lampadina da pochi watt], or again “early fall sky, blue as new jeans” [il primo cielo autunnale, blu come jeans nuovi].

5.2 *The Origins of Matter: THE WORLD IS A FLUID*

Closely related to the exploration of matter is a conceptual metaphor which recurs several times in the novellas, with the precise intent of recalling a primordial state of matter. *THE WORLD IS A FLUID* recalls in fact the ever-changing and generative power of water, which Thales sees as the primary element of matter, as Gass reminds us in one of his essays.¹⁵ Water is the matter of which all things are made, therefore the actions of water have “the power of producing particularity” (Gass 1985: 77), that is the power to assume different forms and states, transforming itself into all kind of matter.

Given this deeply symbolic connotation, we shall try to analyze the linguistic realizations of this conceptual metaphor and see which implications this may have in the process of translation. The first occurrence to be examined refers to Emma Bishop, caught in a sort of epiphany in her search of salvation and fusion with the external world.

She waited for the world, unasked, to flow into her, but she hadn’t yet received its fine full flood. What if it weren’t a liquid, didn’t flow, but stood as if painted in its frame? (Gass 1998: 190)

¹⁵ “Representation and the War for Reality” in Gass 1985: 77.

Aspettava che il mondo, senza che glielo chiedesse, confluisse dentro di lei, ma non aveva ancora ricevuto la sua intensa e immensa inondazione. E se non fosse un liquido? E se invece di scorrere rimanesse immobile come un dipinto incorniciato?

Emma peered more and more through the round thread-wound shade pull. And felt the flow. The world was a fluid. Weights have been lifted off of me. (Gass 1998: 191)

Emma scrutò sempre più intensamente attraverso il cerchio della cordicella delle tende. E sentì il flusso. Il mondo era un fluido. I pesi mi sono stati tolti di dosso.

As we can see in these two occurrences, the concept of a fluid world suggests the sort of osmotic relationship that Emma is craving for; she herself is slowly losing her corporeity and distancing herself from matter, in order to be able to slide into the pure world and be finally part of it.

This same conceptual metaphor is explored also in “Bed and Breakfast,” where it is taken to biblical proportions.

The world was flooded with ruck. And these things had made their way here, sometimes, like the corded candles, even two by two, to Bettie’s Bed and Breakfast, where they might be borne away in safety, surrounded by peace and solicitude. And one day, when the ruck has receded, they will march out of these rooms, this house, into the world again, to replenish it with properly realized things. (Gass 1998: 124)

Il mondo era inondato di detriti. E queste cose erano arrivate fin qua, talvolta, come le candele legate, perfino a coppie, nel Bed and Breakfast di Bettie, dove potevano starsene al sicuro, circondate di pace e premura. E un giorno, quando i detriti si sarebbero ritirati, loro sarebbero uscite a passo di marcia da queste stanze, questa casa, per tornare nel mondo e rifornirlo di cose fatte a dovere.

The metaphorical meaning of “flooded,” retained in the Italian *inondato*, has the double function of activating the underlying conceptual metaphor the world is a fluid, as well as reinforcing our thinking of the Bed and Breakfast in terms of a modern Noah’s Ark, a haven where things can be preserved for future retrieval. The polysemic quality of the word “ruck”¹⁶ has been rendered with *detriti* [lit. debris], in the attempt to

¹⁶ “The undistinguished crowd or general run (of persons or things),” but also (U.S. colloquial) “Nonsense, rubbish”. Source: *Oxford English Dictionary*, Second Edition (1989)

combine brevity of expression with both a literal and a figurative meaning.

A further significant implication of this conceptual metaphor can be found in this dazzling passage from the third section of “Cartesian Sonata,” where Ella Bend and her spiritual clairvoyance are seen through the eyes of her material husband.

Mr. Hess knew no more of the spirit than his hat did—that is, not directly; and if his flesh seemed to be sliding slowly from him like thick batter or heavy syrup, it did not make his bones more saintly. Nevertheless it was that realm, mysterious in its work as magnets, and moving always out of sight and underground like *rivers of electricity*, which was the *source* of his dismay and the cause of his anguish. He did feel that with ingenious instruments it probably could be seen, in some way metered or its passage mapped, for this invisible world in which his wife lived made her weary; the *stream* she swam in was perhaps impalpable, but it left her damp; indeed, there were times when Mr. Hess sensed, somehow, the *current* flowing, and knew that sallow as her skin looked, lifeless as she seemed flung down on a couch or discarded in a chair like emptied clothing, she was lit up inside and *burning* brightly like a lamp. Even so, the only lamp he knew which fit his image of her was the sort which smoked above a poker table; surely she had no sky inside herself to fall from, no ceiling fixture, ceiling chain, or wire burning like a worm. She had her distances, all right, but within was their one direction. (Gass 1998: 46, *my italics*)

Il signor Hess dello spirito ne sapeva quanto il suo cappello—quanto meno, non direttamente; e se la carne sembrava scivolargli lentamente di dosso come una pastella spessa o uno sciroppo denso, questo non rendeva le sue ossa più sante. Tuttavia era quel regno, misterioso nei suoi modi come un magnete, sempre ad agitarsi lontano dagli occhi e sottoterra come un fiume di elettricità, la fonte del suo sgomento e la causa della sua angoscia. Sentiva che con strumenti ingegnosi si poteva probabilmente vedere, in qualche modo misurare o tracciarne il passaggio, perché il mondo invisibile in cui sua moglie viveva la stremava; il fiume in cui lei nuotava poteva anche essere impalpabile, ma la lasciava molle; a dire il vero c'erano momenti in cui il signor Hess sentiva, in qualche modo, il flusso della corrente e sapeva che lei, per quanto giallastra fosse la sua pelle, per quanto priva di vita potesse apparire, buttata su un divano o gettata su una sedia come un vestito svuotato, era illuminata al suo interno e ardeva luminosa come una lampada. Anche così, l'unica lampada di sua conoscenza in grado di adattarsi a quell'immagine di lei era una di quelle che fumano sopra i tavoli del poker; di sicuro non aveva un cielo dentro di sé da cui cadere, niente plafoniera al soffitto, catenella o filamento incandescente come un verme. Aveva i suoi orizzonti, questo sì, ma erano tutti interni.

In order to preserve a figurative meaning for the adjective “damp,”¹⁷ I opted for the Italian *molle* [“soft,” “weak,” but also “soaked wet”] instead of the straightforward *umida*, which had no relevant figurative nuance. The inward movement that drives Ella is peculiar of several Gass’s characters,¹⁸ as well as a recurring pattern of these novellas, and in this case Ella’s “distances” have been rendered with the Italian *orizzonti* [lit. horizons], which, like “distances,” has a conventional figurative meaning and allows for keeping the contrast between outer and inner spaces. The conceptual metaphor of electricity as a fluid, existing in both English and Italian, is revitalized here in an extended metaphorical pattern. This revitalization raises some issues in the translation of the metaphor “river of electricity”. However similarly mapped in Italian, the conceptual domain of electricity as a fluid is not productive in this respect.¹⁹ Nonetheless, given its particular significance in this context, I opted for a literal rendering of the metaphor, *fiume di elettricità*, aware of the higher degree of originality the metaphor has in Italian.²⁰ The idea of fluidity here is further enhanced by the juxtaposition with the image of the oversensitive Ella “burning brightly,” a clash of light and fire ever so productive and relevant in her characterization.

In the case of Ella, the same fluid metaphor returns in the description of her soul: “her soul can only seep away, not fly, it has so little stamina” (Gass 1998: 45) [*con quel poco di vigore che le è rimasto, la sua anima può soltanto colare via, non certo volare*]. Considerations on the relevance of this conceptual metaphor called in this case for a literal rendering of “seep away” with *colare via*, which resulted in a slightly

¹⁷ “Affected with or showing stupefaction or depression of spirits; dazed, stupefied”. Source: *Oxford English Dictionary*, Second Edition (1989)

¹⁸ Notably Emma Bishop in this collection, William Kohler in the novel *The Tunnel* and the narrator of the short-story “In The Heart Of The Heart Of The Country”.

¹⁹ Although equally productive in expressions like “*corrente*” [current] and “*flusso*” [flux, stream]. For a deeper analysis of cross-cultural variations in the productivity of conceptual metaphors, see Kövecses 2003.

²⁰ Besides, the image bears an echo of Ralph W. Emerson’s definition of the man as “the conductor of the whole river of electricity”. A similar “literal” choice had been made in translating Emerson’s metaphor: “un uomo è il conduttore dell’intero fiume dell’elettricità”. (in Emerson, R., *Saggi* [ed. Piero Bertolucci], Torino: Boringhieri, 1962: 292).

more striking metaphor, since *colare via* does not have the same conventional figurative meaning associated with “to seep”. However, the image allowed retaining the reference to the idea of fluidity, as well as adding a paronomasia *colare/volare* (enhanced by shifting it to the end of the sentence) which seems a small, good compensation for my elsewhere defective rendering of the musical quality of the text.

5.3 The Music of Prose: Further Constraints

Musicality is undoubtedly a salient trait of Gass’s fiction, as one can easily perceive on a first reading of these novellas. Besides, the music of prose has long been a key concept in Gass’s aesthetics and one of the qualities he evaluates most in the writers he appreciates, Rainer Maria Rilke and Henry James above all. In his essay “The Music of Prose,” Gass defines it as a second “syntax”:

Musical form creates another syntax, which overlaps the grammatical and reinforces that set of directions sometimes, or adds another dimension by suggesting that two words, when they alliterate or rhyme, thereby modify each other, even if they are not in any normally modifying position. Everything a sentence is is made manifest by its music. (Gass 1996: 323)

His frequent use of alliterative patterns in these novellas represents a precise stylistic choice, functional to enrich that complex network of connections that keeps the text together. As such, his alliterations, not dissimilarly from metaphors and similes (with which they share the capability of establishing connections), call for creative effort on the part of the translator wishing to preserve the connective texture of the source text. This is particularly true of alliterations added to similes, a combination which reinforces the statement of similarity (extending it to the physical, auditory quality of the two terms) and speeds up the rhythm of the sentence, as if compensating the lengthy structure of the simile with the forward-movement given by the recurrence of similar sounds. The whole collection is full of such similes, especially the novella “Emma Enters a Sentence of Elizabeth Bishop’s,” where the musicality of the prose touches lyrical peaks and the influence of poetry and its rhetorical devices become apparent. “Its wood is spongy, but brittle as briars,” “The flies would land as softly as soot,” “the mound will sink like

syrup into the soil” [my italics] (Gass 1998: 167, 183, 190) are but a few examples of the alliterations that can be found in the text. In order to retain the fundamental musicality of these patterns, sometimes some semantic variation has been allowed in order to accommodate “sounder” words: *il legno era spugnoso, ma secco come uno spino* [lit. “dried up as a thorn(-tree)”], *Le mosche atterravano leggere come fuliggine* [lit. “The flies would land as light as soot”], *il tumulto sprofonderà come scioppo nel suolo*.

6. Conclusions

The collection of novellas considered in this paper offers a rich ground for the exploration of the implications and scope of metaphors in literary discourse. A contextual analysis of metaphors in a self-enclosed body of fiction reveals extended patterns and cross-references which may amplify, or in any case modify, the effects of single linguistic metaphors. This is why any consideration on the translatability of metaphors shall proceed from a contextual account of the overall metaphoricity of the text. Such an account will inform the decision-making process taken on by the translator, offering him cues toward a fuller interpretation of the metaphorical expressions encountered. Moreover, a study of metaphors in context allows accounting for strategies of compensation employed by translators, in the light of their perception of the overall nature of the source-text and the network of associations it establishes.

Van den Broeck’s law of metaphor translatability (Van den Broeck 1981: 84) seems still a profitable model, since density and structuring of information within metaphorical expressions are indeed the key concepts in their translatability, as we have in part tried to show in this paper. Verbal wordplay, revitalization, alliteration, musicality, all these factors act as further layers in the packing of information, and ultimately it is the degree to which they are structured—and foregrounded—in metaphorical expressions to define the limits of their translatability.

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